Bibliographic Guides

Jonangpa and Shentong: A Bibliography of English Language Materials

Eastern Tradition Research Institute

Eastern Tradition Research Institute's *Bibliographic Guides* are compiled and annotated by David Reigle, in collaboration with Nancy Reigle, who are solely responsible for their content.

updated January 2007

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INTRODUCTION

The Buddhist Madhyamaka or Middle Way school taught that everything is empty (*śūnya/stong pa*) of inherent existence or inherent nature (*svabhāva/rang bzhin*). That is, since things are not found to have an independent nature of their own, but can exist only in dependence on causes and conditions, they cannot be said to inherently exist. This school was followed by virtually all Buddhists in Tibet. The majority understood this to mean that not only everything we see in conventional reality, but also whatever we postulate as ultimate reality, is empty of inherent existence. In other words, there is nothing that exists ultimately. Some, however, understood this to mean only that conventional reality is empty of inherent existence, but ultimate reality is not. Rather, it is empty (*stong*) of everything other (*gzhan*) than itself. It in some sense does exist ultimately, but it is beyond the range of dualistic concepts of existence and non-existence. This is the Shentong (*gzhan stong*) doctrine. This was first promulgated by the Tibetan teacher Dolpopa (1292-1361) and his Jonangpa order.

Our main source on the Shentong doctrine as originally taught is Dolpopa's magnum opus, *Ri chos nges don rgya mtsho*. A complete English translation of this large book was published under the title, *Mountain Doctrine; Tibet's Fundamental Treatise on Other-Emptiness and the Buddha-Matrix*, in 2006. Thanks to Jeffrey Hopkins, the translator, we are now able to see this doctrine as it was originally taught. Dolpopa's books were banned in Tibet in the mid-1600s C.E., and his Jonangpa order was suppressed. At that point, the Shentong teachings went largely into the Kagyu and Nyingma orders, where they were amalgamated with the distinctive teachings of those orders, and therefore necessarily somewhat altered from how Dolpopa originally taught them. As stated by Cyrus Stearns, "What is now taught as the Zhentong view in the Kagyü and Nyingma traditions represents a synthesis that has developed over the centuries, primarily in order to enable Dolpopa's most vital insights to be incorporated into the already established doctrines of the Great Seal [Mahāmudrā] and the Great Perfection [Dzogchen]."[1]

The Shentong doctrine, then, as found in the Kagyu and Nyingma orders today, differs from the Jonangpa Shentong doctrine originally taught by Dolpopa. In fact, Dolpopa strongly disagreed with a primary Mahāmudrā teaching, that is also found in Dzogchen. This is the teaching that one should simply recognize the nature of one's own mind, or the essence of one's own thoughts, to be the buddha-body of reality (*dharma-kāya*), in order to achieve enlightenment. The idea is that whatever arises in the mind is the mere play of the wisdom. So one need not try to stop negative thoughts and emotions, but rather, just recognize them as the *dharma-kāya* or the play of wisdom. If you are successful in this practice, you will become enlightened. Dolpopa disagreed strongly with this. He responded that this is like saying that if you recognize fire as the *dharma-kāya*, it will not burn you, or if you realize poison as the *dharma-kāya*, it will not harm you. He held that negative thoughts and emotions obscure the *dharma-kāya* like clouds obscure the sun, and that these must be removed through spiritual practices aimed at stopping their arising. Thus, although the Shentong doctrine provides, for all who accept it, the teaching that the *dharma-kāya* exists ultimately, the methods for realizing it differ significantly between the Jonangpas on the one hand, and the Kagyu Mahāmudrā and Nyingma Dzogchen on the other.[2]

For the Jonangpas, the way to achieve enlightenment is, above all, through Kālacakra practice. Dolpopa was renowned as a master of the Kālacakra six-limbed yoga, and the Jonangpa expertise in this is acknowledged even by their strongest critics, the Gelugpas.[3] So, while the doctrinal differences between the Jonangpas and the Gelugpas are significant, there is no conflict when it comes to Kālacakra practice. Here they come together, both being primary proponents of the Kālacakra teachings.

Doctrinally, the Gelugpas follow Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka, the teaching that everything whatsoever is empty of inherent existence; i.e., that nothing exists ultimately. Those who accept the Shentong view follow what they term Great Madhyamaka, the Great Middle Way, teaching that ultimate reality is not empty of inherent existence, but instead is empty of everything other than itself; i.e., it exists ultimately. They both agree that

conventional reality is empty of inherent existence. Thus it is only on the status of the ultimate that there is disagreement. These contrasting views, often termed Rangtong (*rang stong*), "self-empty," and Shentong, "other-empty," have been debated in Tibet right up to the present.

About twenty-five years after Dolpopa brought out for the first time the Shentong teaching through his large book, the *Mountain Doctrine*, and only a few years before his death, he wrote a smaller book presenting this teaching more succinctly. This is called *The Fourth Council*, having reference to the three historical councils that were held to determine what authentic books existed that should constitute the Buddhist canon. In this book, Dolpopa cites as witnesses a large number of Buddhist texts to show the authenticity of the Shentong doctrine. It has been translated by Cyrus Stearns in his 1999 book, *The Buddha from Dolpo*. This book by Stearns, then, is the best place to start, before trying to read Dolpopa's larger *Mountain Doctrine*.

The following bibliography includes materials in English on the Jonangpa order, and on the Shentong doctrine as taught by Jonangpas, Kagyupas, and Nyingmapas. Jonangpa materials are few, because their books had been banned, and were not widely available. A few stray volumes in Tibetan were found and published in the 1970s-1980s. In the early 1990s a seven-volume set of Dolpopa's Collected Works was acquired from one of their few monasteries still remaining, located in a remote area of what was far eastern Tibet, and published. Further, there is now some access to Jonangpa teachers. So we can expect many more Jonangpa materials to be published in the near future.

Notes

1. Cyrus Stearns, *The Buddha from Dolpo*, p. 77.
2. More on Dolpopa's views in this regard can be found in the book by Cyrus Stearns, *The Buddha from Dolpo*, pp. 98-105.
3. Tsongkhapa, 1357-1419, founder of the Gelugpa order, in his book, *The Essence of Eloquence*, criticized the Shentong doctrine that Dolpopa put forward, and Gelugpas have opposed it ever since.

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Paul Williams. *Mahāyāna Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations*. London and New York: Routledge, 1989, pp. 96-115 is chap. 5, "The *tathāgatagarbha* (Buddha-essence/Buddha-nature)," with

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Jeffrey Hopkins, trans. *The Essence of Other-Emptiness*, by Taranatha. Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 2007. (a concise work on Shentong by the second most famous Jonangpa writer, Tāranātha)